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Kucherenko: “People’s Voice” raised community profile and NGO capacity

The “People’s Voice” project comes to an end in December 2007. Implemented by the World Bank, PADCO, a consultancy, and the International Centre for Policy Studies (ICPS) with funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), “People’s Voice” aimed at supporting the development and facilitation of various citizen engagement activities throughout Ukraine as a way to improve the quality of municipal services. For three years, the project team worked in six Ukrainian cities: Alchevsk, Chernihiv, Kolomyia, Komsomolsk, Lutsk, and Makiyivka. Project Manager Oleksandr Kucherenko talks about the main results of this project

ICPS: Mr. Kucherenko, the “People’s Voice” comes to an end this month. To what extent has the project achieved its goal of improving the quality of local services using mechanisms and procedures that promote public participation in effective, responsible and open local government in Ukraine?

Oleksandr Kucherenko: I would say that we have achieved the main goal. Local governments in the cities that we worked with have become more open and they now listen to local residents more frequently, in an effort to satisfy their needs and demands in a better way.

Here, I’d like to emphasize immediately that the quality of public services depends on quite a few officials, many of whom were outside the scope of our project. But, the main things that we have achieved are the promotion of public involvement, better capacity among community organizations, and the building of an active public position among residents of these cities.

ICPS: What percentage would you put on the level of achievement?

OK: I would have to start with what we specifically worked on. “People’s Voice” had two components: support for community organizations and better public participation, and building local government capacity to provide services to local residents.

We organized many initiatives dealing with the first and the second components. As for community organizations, some 125

mini-projects dealing with various issues were implemented as part of the Community Initiatives Fund. These were small grants from US \$500 to US \$1,000 provided to community organizations in a given city or town. Every one of them was carried out. Here, I can say that we reached our goal 100%.

As for introducing innovative mechanisms into the system of management, everything was a little more difficult. In each town, we planned two initiatives, and of 12 initiatives, implementation was successful in all but three instances. In any case, even there, the experience was useful.

ICPS: You’ve already summed up the main results, but what can you say about miscalculations?

OK: I can say that the main miscalculations were overestimated expectations of different municipal governments. And these were mostly due to objective factors. Over the last three and a half years, we underwent elections, as a result of which mayors changed in four of the six cities,—and this means the entire team changed.

Those responsible for coordination on the government side changed in all six partner cities. This did little to contribute to consistency in our efforts and definitely had a negative impact on this project. Projects that were successfully launched, such as, in Chernihiv, where we set an objective to raise the quality of services in maintaining and managing housing stock, have not been followed through. That is unfortunately business as usual in this country, when the

governments change and priorities change as well.

The same thing happened in Kolomyia. We developed software for a single accounting center for payments for residential services. However, the new government after the elections did not find an application for it. This also was affected by the fact that, during this period, the majority of consumers switched from central heating to individual furnaces. So one of the service providers simply disappeared. You could say that this was a miscalculation on our part.

The first initiative in Lutsk also failed. We were trying to establish public oversight of the quality of residential services. The previous city government happened to be uninterested in such mechanisms. But the situation suddenly changed after the 2006 elections, when a new generation of managers, who mostly came from the community sector, came to power.

Nevertheless, these same initiatives were successfully implemented in other cities. For instance, an action plan developed in Chernihiv to institute a competitive environment on the residential services market and develop associations of co-owners in multi-story apartment buildings was brilliantly implemented in Makiyivka. This is what I mean by “this experience was very useful.”

ICPS: The project had six partner cities: Alchevsk and Makiyivka in Donetsk oblast, Kolomyia in Ivano-Frankivsk oblast, Komsomolsk in Poltava oblast, Lutsk in Volyn oblast, and Chernihiv. Which cities were the leaders and which the outsiders, in your estimation?

OK: There are reasons to think that we were more successful in Komsomolsk. Before the project, Komsomolsk was distinguished by a very serious approach to municipal government and very serious objectives.

I would put Makiyivka, a town with difficult socio-economic conditions where we managed

to implement two initiatives to improve the quality of services, in second place. The first initiative was a quality management system (QMS) based on ISO 9001:2000. Persistent work, primarily on the part of ordinary employees in municipal bodies, allowed us to institute new standards for the quality of work of the local government.

The second initiative was introducing the institution of managers of multi-story housing stock. Two tenders for management services were held and two private firms were selected. These companies began to provide services to local residents that were earlier provided by the residential services bureaus known as ZhEK in Ukrainian. And, mostly thanks to the project activities, the number of co-owners' associations in multi-story apartment buildings in Makiyivka grew 6 times over these three years, from 50 to 300.

As for Alchevsk, I think the main progress there was the development of community organizations over the last three years. Even if the first year of project activities was not very fruitful, after changing local project coordinators in 2005, the "People's Voice" went into full swing in this city and, today, the community has a voice that's getting heard.

In Kolomyia, community organizations proved very effective. We not only expanded the number of community organizations that are now actively and consciously working in this town, but also significantly expanded their capacities and instruments. With the help of this project, a Municipal Community Fund was set up in Kolomyia. The Youth Center began to work actively and has already established wide connections with associates from other towns. But cooperation with the local government in Kolomyia turned out to be less successful.

Even in Chernihiv, where 2006 was a loss because of permanent change in the government, we achieved certain results. I think that, for Chernihiv, the preparation and adoption of a strategic municipal development plan accompanied by broad public debate was a real milestone. We began to work on this plan back in 2005, but it was completed only last month, in November, when we held the public hearings.

ICPS: What were the main difficulties you had to face?

OK: I already mentioned the 2006 elections and the impact of a new team—these difficulties are typical of Ukraine, where the principle of transfer of power does not actually work. A new team comes in and, as a rule, it rejects whatever was done by its predecessors. The only place where this didn't happen was in Komsomolsk where, although the mayor was new, the team continued to work in a well-organized manner.

With community organizations, the main problems emerged in Eastern Ukraine. Makiyivka and Alchevsk, which we deliberately selected as typical of Eastern Ukraine, differed in terms of the evolution of civil society, compared to other cities. The first stage was quite difficult here. In Alchevsk, we faced a situation where there were practically no organizations that could work independent of the government. It was hard to find an organization that even had a bank account.

However, the situation has changed, and it changed not only thanks to our project—democratization processes are affecting all of Ukraine. But we also made significant inroads. Today, Alchevsk and Makiyivka show a serious level of community organizations that defend the interests of various parts of their community in a very professional manner, that have skills to write grant applications and to implement projects, and that have a presence at public hearings or other initiatives. I think we overcame this obstacle.

ICPS: How were you able to apply lessons from the first stage of "People's Voice," which was implemented in Ivano-Frankivsk, Ternopil, Kupiansk, and Chuhuyiv over 1999–2002, during the second stage?

OK: I wasn't with this project during its first stage, but some people on our team were, including Tom Monastyrski who was Project Director from the very beginning. We took all the best practice from the experiences of our predecessors. This was firstly true of the research component. During "People's Voice-1," we instituted "polling by report cards" for the first time. Such polls were carried out both in Ternopil and in Ivano-Frankivsk.

This poll became the foundation of our project. We carried out a basic poll at the beginning, in 2004, and a repeat poll in 2007. This provided us with useful information about the attitudes of local residents to the activities of municipal governments and their satisfaction with various types of services.

However, we didn't stop at this. We decided that we needed to train local researchers, too. We organized a workshop series in each city and provided software. We also published a practical handbook, and now we can proudly state that, today, almost all the towns have the potential to independently carry out this kind of study. As part of the Community Initiatives Fund, several dozen surveys of this kind were carried out on local issues by local researchers.

And the second important thing that we took from the first stage and emphasized during the second stage was joint activities between government bodies and community organizations. In each town, we set up

an advisory committee consisting of 50% government representatives and 50% local CSOs. The selection of applications to the Community Initiatives Fund was handled by tender committees that also consisted of representatives of both groups. This mechanism or the experience of joint activities will remain in all these cities and will hopefully make it possible for them to make joint decisions in the future.

ICPS: Do the donor and the executors plan to continue this work in other cities?

OK: This project will not be continued. From the very beginning, the idea was that this stage would be the final one. Still, we expect the work itself to be continued. First of all, the "report card" method has been mastered by many local organizations. I can also think of two other issues that we have raised that will continue to matter in the future.

This project was one of the first in Ukraine that set the objective of instituting QMS according to ISO standards in local governments. When we held the first international conference in 2004, there was only such one town in Ukraine—Berdiansk in Zaporizhzhia oblast. In October 2007, we held a repeat conference and this time there were 15 towns with such a system in place. As many again are currently working on instituting QMS. This process is ongoing and it needs support. The question is, who will provide support for these efforts in the future? Even if there is no donor support, we already see that these municipalities are determined to implement all this at their own expense. This makes me confident that our experience and the materials that we developed will continue to be used.

In my opinion, one important outcome of this project was the development of ways and means for reforming the system of managing multi-story housing stock. The result was twofold: the development of associations of co-owners of multi-story apartment buildings, that is, organizations that represent the interests of residents, and the development of competition on the market. We not only implemented this successfully in Makiyivka, but we also assisted the Ministry of Residential Services in developing a regulatory base, including a draft new Housing Code.

Finally, I'd like to say that the "People's Voice" is not really coming to an end at this point. It will live on in the cities with whom we cooperated over these three years and its achievements will benefit many other cities and towns in Ukraine. ■

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